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EX-INTELLIGENCE OFFICIAL DENIES POW COVERUP
BY NEIL ROLAND
WASHINGTON

A former top intelligence official says American prisoners of war are probably alive in Southeast Asia but denounced allegations that the Reagan and Carter administrations have not addressed the problem.

"Yes, I think there are American prisoners alive in Southeast Asia," Lt. Gen. Eugene Tighe, the director of the Defense Intelligence Agency from 1977 to 1981, told United Press International in a recent interview.

"But both the Reagan and Carter administrations have made every effort to find them and secure their release."

Vietnam agreed Tuesday, in a meeting with a U.S. delegation, to investigate reports of missing Americans in Indochina.

Tighe branded as "a forgery" Tuesday a letter with his deputy's signature alleging the Carter administration ducked efforts to find out about American POWs.

The undated letter, which was introduced as an exhibit in U.S. District Court in Fayetteville, N.C., on Monday, said, "The administration will not face up to the problem (of POWs)." It was written on DIA stationery and signed by Lt. Gen. Harold Aaron, DIA deputy director under Carter.

Tighe said that Aaron, whom he described as "my hand-picked deputy and a very close friend," would not make such an allegation. Aaron has since died.

Tighe is one of eight top officials named as defendants in a suit filed by two former Green Berets accusing the Reagan and Carter administrations of "discrediting" efforts to obtain the release of American POWs.

The Pentagon has said the POW information reported by the two soldiers is "hearsay," unfounded, and outdated.

Seven other individuals, including several former military and intelligence officers, have filed affidavits accusing the DIA, CIA and U.S. Embassy in Thailand of suppressing POW reports.

Tighe's estimate on the basis of 1981 intelligence information that 50 to 60 American POWs may be alive in Southeast Asia differed with the Reagan administration.

Pentagon spokesman Lt. Col. Keith Schneider said, "We have not taken the position that there are live Americans over there."

The administration's position, Schneider said, is: "Although we have thus far been unable to prove that Americans are still detained against their will, the information available to us precludes ruling out that possibility.

"Actions to investigate live sighting reports," Schneider said, "receive and will continue to receive necessary priority and resources based on the assumption that at least some Americans are still held captive. Should any report prove true, we will take appropriate action to ensure the return of those involved."

The administration has been unable to resolve 119 of the 811 POW reports it has received from purported witnesses, Schneider said.